

## Senioritis

In *Social Security*, Grandma's on the move and the family's in a tizz

By Elaine Liner



Randy Pearlman, Mary-Margaret Pyeatt, Marcia Carroll and Nye Cooper, secure in their roles in Contemporary Theatre's production of *Social Security*.

Details:

*Social Security* continues through September 2 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas. Call 214-828-0094.

As likable as it is, *Social Security* suffers from a serious case of the coots. The two-act comedy by Andrew Bergman, now onstage at **Contemporary Theatre of Dallas**, wants to be a smart and witty farce about three generations of mother-daughter power struggles. What it is, however, is *Golden Girls* goes to Manhattan, a slick, nicely performed bit of fluff that treats its old people like curiosities.

The estro-generational conflict begins in a first-act war between middle-aged sisters Barbara Kahn and Trudy Heyman (played by Marcia Carroll and Mary-Margaret Pyeatt) over which of them will take permanent custody of their high-maintenance ma, Sophie Greengrass (Linda Comess). Barbara, living the high life as the wife of David, a 57th Street gallery owner (Nye Cooper), doesn't have kids but still doesn't have time to play nursemaid. Barbara, stuck on Long Island with accountant-hubby Martin (Randy Pearlman), is plumb worn out from their mother's demanding regimen of pills and tantrums.

The play abruptly shifts in its second half to how the women react when their mother does something nobody expects: At 80, troublesome Sophie falls in love.

Her wheezy squeeze is Maurice Koenig (Harry Reinwald), a 98-year-old artist of some renown. This liver-spotted Chagall type boasts an impressive body of work and, apparently, key body parts that still work. The widow and widower lock cataracts over

cocktails at Barbara and David's swank Manhattan apartment (dig those faux marble wall panels on designer Randel Wright's sleek set).

It's at the second-act dinner party (where nobody eats a bite, by the way) that this play really gets clicking comedywise. Sophie's magical transformation from walker-dragging old nag to gamine granny may be incredible, but it is funny. Actress Linda Comess is Estelle Getty in a housecoat one minute and Jeanne Moreau (with a touch of Ruth Gordon) in a cocktail dress the next. It's a neat geriat-trick.

That's all good, but Bergman spends nearly an hour before the surprising Sophie-Maurice hook-up winding in and out of noisy complaints by Trudy and Martin about how they've had it up to *there* with the old lady (who doesn't enter until just before intermission). As full-time caretakers on the verge of momicide, they've been driven mad by Sophie's half-sucked sourballs and round-the-clock kvetching. According to them, she's a vicious invalid, a harridan in rolled-down Supp-Hose. They're eager to ditch her for a few weeks while they shuffle off to Buffalo to check on their oversexed daughter, who's gone AWOL from college and might be shackled up with two guys in what her father calls a "menagerie."

Confusing "menagerie" with *ménage à trois*, holding up Brie as a high-priced indulgence on par with the eggs of Caspian Sea beluga—so playwright Bergman paints suburban Martin as the Philistine *shlepper*. He and Trudy are deli-case gefilte fish to David and Barbara's catered mousse of pike. The "fancy relatives" have a doorman and an art collection. Martin's the sort who asks what everything costs and recoils in horror when David offers a squirt of lime for his Tab. *Social Security* comments on class differences, as well as internecine squabbles and elder-care.

Sister Trudy's revenge on her uppity sibling is to dump Sophie, lock, stock and Mylanta, at Barbara's without warning. "Just like a package from Altman's," snipes Sophie, referring to the fusty Fifth Avenue department store favored by the blue-hair set until it closed in the late 1980s.

In such small details does *Social Security* show its age. A yearlong hit (despite critical drubs) on Broadway in 1986, the play came along when domestic comedies about oddball Jewish families were all the rage, starting with Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach* trilogy. Andrew Bergman writes lots of punchy lines, but he's no Neil Simon. He's also no Mel Brooks, though his best writing credit is collaborating with the great one on the 1974 movie comedy *Blazing Saddles*. *Fletch* and *Honeymoon in Vegas* are on Bergman's credits list too, along with *Oh, God! You Devil* and *Striptease*. Into every writer's life, a little *schmutz* must fall.

*Schmaltz* is the word for *Social Security*. That's Yiddish for grease, specifically the yellow stuff rendered from chicken fat. It's also a synonym for anything that feels excessively sentimental. And that's where Bergman's play tries to have it both ways. He gives us 90 minutes of full-throttle joketeering. ("Ask not for whom the walker thumps," says Barbara as Sophie approaches ominously from another room. "It thumps for thee.")

Then he quits with the quips and gets mushy about sisters and mothers, husbands and wives and what it means to find romance among the ruins.

What lurks beneath the humor in the play, though, isn't an abiding affection for love-starved senior citizens, but a clear contempt for them. How dare Sophie upset the carefully balanced family dynamic by running off to a suite at the Carlyle with Maurice? What will happen to Trudy if she loses her identity as the good daughter who takes care of Mom? As much as they fret and whine about how much they don't want Sophie in their lives, both girls flip out when she asserts a little independence with her new-old boyfriend.

Bergman also does a bait and switch on the audience. First we're asked to laugh at Sophie, then we're supposed to root for her as she becomes Maurice's late-life lover and artistic muse. The U-turn is navigated in CTD's production by actors comfortable with making lovable fools of themselves. Comess' delicate touches with Sophie give grace to what could be a broadly overplayed caricature of an octogenarian. The actress seems to lose 20 years of droop with her first glance at Maurice.

Everyone in the CTD ensemble is tiptop. Director Cheryl Denson, always a whiz with the funny, wouldn't have it any other way. Nye Cooper is all rolling eyes and bony joints as David. Nobody's better with a comic aside. "I'm flip, which is another way of being shy," he cracks.

Pyeatt and Pearlman play up their opposite body types to great effect. Marcia Carroll, who possesses snap timing and stupendous legs, plays a beautifully wacky Barbara. Her take on the character is to let her mouth hop the IRT express while her brain's still waiting on the platform. And as Maurice, Harry Reinwald, probably only half as old as his role, makes us believe that underneath the old gray ponytail is a still-sexy stud.

In this senior Cinderella story, love conquers all, even acid reflux and a formulaic script. Is it a great play? Hardly. But look, it's summertime in theaterland and we need to laugh a lot and sigh a little and enjoy a little schmaltz with a side of icy Tab. Reasons enough to see *Social Security*? Check.